

# Deaf culture.

NID Training Disability Diary - Compiled by Dr Jean Mitchell



## Introduction

Internationally people with hearing impairment consider themselves to be linguistic minority groups, with their own language (Sign Language) and their own culture. However, they are not homogenous groups, as in any culture they are also part of other groups based on customs, religion, lifestyle, political viewpoints, education and so on. The thing that makes them a community is that they use Sign Language to communicate with each other (Gala, 2023).

## Discussion

A culture does not simply happen to allow one group of people to be different from others: it develops over years and is the result of the need to survive as a group. Deaf Culture is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (article 30, paragraph 4) in this way:

Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture (UN, 2016).

Deaf culture is technically defined as a subculture and the way people with hearing impairments find their place in the world (Ladd, 2002). Persons who identify with Deaf culture describe themselves as Deaf (with a capital D). Not every member of the group has the same level of impairment, neither do they all agree on matters such as education, religion or politics (Bedoin, 2019).

The most important thing is whether the person identifies with other Deaf people and behaves as a Deaf person. This suggests that 'being Deaf' is actually a socially established idea. In a sociocultural sense Deafness serves both to identify the Deaf community and to establish the boundaries which define that community (Kusters & Lucas, 2022). People who regard themselves as part of the Deaf culture prefer to refer to themselves by a noun, Deaf. They do not see themselves as handicapped, impaired, or disabled. Instead, they celebrate their culture because they share a common history and language.

In Deaf culture the terms deaf, hard of hearing and so on, refer to a person's audiological status and the lower case 'd' is used. When this form is used, the word 'deaf' simply means 'unable to hear'. It says nothing about the individual, the individual's language or culture. Using the capital letter D in Deaf refers to the whole, diverse spectrum of persons with hearing loss (Kusters & Lucas, 2022) in the same way that using a capital letter G to refer to people of Greek origin, or a capital Z to refer to someone of the Zulu culture. Similarly, Sign Language is also written with capital letters, in the same way as English or isiZulu is.

The National Institute for the Deaf web site (NID, nd) identifies certain behaviour that is perfectly acceptable

in hearing culture is considered impolite in Deaf culture. Some of these are eye contact, touch, personal space or proximity, directness, and gaining attention.

## Conclusion

Not all people with hearing loss associate with Deaf culture, but at the same time, hearing people, like parents, relatives, professionals or friends, can be accepted as part of Deaf culture as long as they have an appropriate attitude towards the Deaf community and Sign Language. When South Africans use South African Sign Language (SASL) as their primary language, they see themselves as being the same as any other minority group and, by rights, should be seen in this way by others.

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